

EXHIBIT 2

The Honorable Judge Robert J. Jonker
United States District Court
Western District of Michigan
685 Federal Bldg.
110 Michigan St NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Re: USA v. Boden et al Case # 1:21-cr-0040-RJJ-1

November 20th, 2021

Honorable Chief Judge Robert. J. Jonker,

My name is Kathryn Christopher, I am a professor in the school of engineering at Grand Valley State University. I was a board member at the lab, am a Westside community member, and remain a huge proponent of local educational programs. I have been a close friend, supporter, and confidant of Chris's for the last 5 years.

As a member of the Board of Directors of The Geek Group National Science Institute (herein referred to as TGG), I helped them fight for resources and watched as they struggled to get them. I watched Chris literally open his personal wallet to buy equipment that the lab needed but couldn't afford; I also personally donated my time and money to help them succeed. I helped fill out grants, painted walls, cleaned up messes, wrote to foundations, and taught members about software, science, and technology. I was inspired by their work, Chris's work, and the mission to which we were all so dedicated.

Community and Culture

TGG was an all-volunteer organization, even Chris went without a paycheck most months because operating a 43,000 square foot building with hundreds of students working on projects was quite expensive. Nearly every dime Chris made he put back into the group. Often, we would get warnings at 9 am that if we didn't pay a bill by noon, the heat or power was going to be shut off. Many times, Chris begged for the resources out of donors, but sometimes we simply couldn't do it. In the fall of 2018, there were nearly a dozen shut-off notices given to the lab by consumers power, and for a large part of the winter of 2017 and 2018, the building was without gas and heat – including the apartment in which Chris lived.

The lab provided a community resource that was unlike anything else in the world. At Chris's direction, the lab brought in school tours to get kids excited about science and donated thousands of laptops to local families and students in need. The lobby was always open for someone to come in and warm-up or cool down during power outages, and I watched Chris take his time with hundreds of curious kids to answer their endless questions and instill in them that science could be both cool and important.

Being immersed in TGG, I saw first-hand that it fostered a genuine sense of community that is

hard to find in today's world. It is difficult to live your life as an outcast, but at TGG everyone's abilities and differences were celebrated. It was the type of place that gave a sense of belonging to the kids who were bullied in high school because they weren't athletes and liked to tinker instead of talk. For my job, I have traveled to many countries and visited plenty of other universities and educational centers, but I have never seen a place that created community and belonging in a way the TGG did. This is further evidenced by the fact that TGG attracted people from all over the world, in over 100 countries, all who supported their efforts, the trades, and the scientific community.

The people at TGG were a family and we took care of each other through thick and thin. Chris would put on his "showman" persona most days to try to recruit more members, get donations, or simply make an impression on whoever was walking in the door. That personality shows through in many of his videos, but I saw what Chris was like behind that mask. I saw Chris work on projects late into the night, I saw him exhausted, drained, and defeated on the days he couldn't pay the bills. It was a really tough road for him to traverse, but it was his lifelong dream, his passion, and he was making unimaginable sacrifices just to keep it alive.

As Vice President of the Board of Directors I had a close and accurate view of the financial status of TGG and also spent time with Chris daily discussing the operations of the lab. I saw the heartbreak, the stress, and the constant anxiety about what would come next. No matter what challenges came our way, he kept the dream alive; his enthusiasm was contagious. It brought out the best in everyone. Chris has a way of getting the best from someone, motivating and inspiring them to achieve their highest potential, and that continual focus on the good, on what could be, on the dream – that was what kept us going and motivated even on the hard days in that frozen building.

Backstory

For most of its 25 year history, the primary difficulty in getting funding at The Geek Group was getting people to understand what we did and to take it seriously. We were often mistaken for the "weird computer geeks," and we struggled to articulate ourselves on grant applications and during tours. It took us years to get our footing under us and to articulate what we did. We finally landed on "national science center" and then while discussing this topic at the White House, we were told that a "national science institute" made far more sense. We were on a roll - not quite there, but finally on a trajectory to get there.

Between 2015 - 2018, TGG had finally started gathering community partners and was getting consistent, if very small, financial contributions from foundations that typically cared for more "serious" institutions. We were able to describe our actions to organizations clearly and concisely and were also able to better communicate our purpose to potential members. This helped compel them to become financially supporting members, whether or not they actually wanted to physically use the space themselves.

As part of this, we did a lot of growth internally, which caused us to lose many internal members and volunteers who did not share the same vision for where we were going in the future. They perhaps wanted to keep things small and haphazard, which can be fun if you want to keep innovation limited to what you can do with your friends. However, in order to scale things up, it

does require streamlining the process as a whole and maturing the organization. Progress requires such growing pains.

By the end of 2018, we had partnerships with Kent Intermediate School District, Kent District Libraries, several of the courts from around West Michigan and the Chicago general area (for community service), the Public Museum, the Maker's Faire, etc. We were doing field trips on a regular basis, doing programming for the Maker Faire as one of the founding members, and using our building as a host for a wide variety of purposes from Boy Scouts to professional meetup groups.

On the day of the raid, the agents flatly said, "We aren't here to shut you down." However, by the time we were able to get to computers again (as all active phones, computers, and electronics were seized), we discovered that we had already lost partnerships with organizations. I remember discussing with some of the other board members the night of the raid that "maybe we don't need to close yet. Maybe this decision should take a few days," but by the next day it was clear, it had been made for us. The bank even called to tell us they were stopping our mortgage and within a few days we had been sued to be put into receivership.

By the end of the weekend, we had dozens of messages from members asking to cancel their memberships. We were obviously going to cancel everybody's membership effective immediately, so it was not really the loss of income that was the difficult part to take, it was the loss in faith.

Within two weeks, when everybody had returned from their holiday breaks and had plenty of chances to read every news article published, every single community partner we'd ever had severed ties with us. People who did community service with us had been told "effective immediately" to find other places to do their hours. At the time we had somewhere between 15-30 people volunteering every week in addition to the normal staff of approximately 15; suddenly not having their assistance, at a time we needed it most, was jarring.

We had a few people help until the very end, removing everything, packing it up, throwing things away. But even the most regular volunteers decided they had better things to do. That is their prerogative, but it did make the burden of it just more difficult to physically do. We were covered in bruises, battered in the most physical way. The shadow cast on the organization and on us for continuing to show up was exceptionally clear. For the last three months, there were only seven of us trying to close everything down.

Without a building, without members, without any community partners, and with a reputation that was far worse than battered - there was nothing to be done. We did not even have discussions about trying to continue in a different capacity or start over. We'd faced hard challenges in the past and regrouped, but this one was very clear. It was over.

Throughout the past several years, there has been a special kind of endurance we were not expecting. People who know my affiliation with The Geek Group and have read the news - perhaps not even all of the articles but just the headlines, they aren't usually familiar with case specifics - and just come to wild conclusions. The number of times I have heard, "Oh, wasn't

that the place that was doing drug deals?” or “Oh, isn’t that the place where everybody was arrested?” is astounding.

These accusations have no basis in the true context of anything that happened, but the mechanics of rumors are such that they move wildly and on their own. It is exhausting to try to combat and has left a stain on an organization that does not deserve it - on people who do not deserve it. It is sad that most people seem only to know about the end, the heartbreak, and the loss rather than the beginning and all of the nuanced, amazing, and productive things that TGG accomplished.

We certainly made mistakes and for that we all have invariable regret but repeating the story and clarifying it over and over is a weight inside that none of us ever expected to carry.

The Aftermath

The first time I met Chris was actually in the first ever bitcoin class he held at the lab in May of 2017. I was enthralled with the new technology immediately. After Chris watched me fill out my own word list, he asked if I could help him do it for others. Being an engineer, I can letter and helped everyone that day fill out their word lists to ensure they could read them later. After my initial introduction to the lab, I volunteered there on a regular basis. Chris frequently asked me to help him set up wallets and write word lists for people at other bitcoin classes and at appointments. Chris and I set up hundreds of wallets together, comprising thousands of transactions, and of all the interactions I was present for, not a single one was related to drugs or any other illegal activity. I did, however, see plenty of grandparents purchase bitcoin as an investment to help pay for their grandkid’s college tuition. With the exponential increase in the value of bitcoin since those transactions, I have no doubt that Chris helped facilitate putting many of the next generation’s students through college.

As someone who lives in the community in which TGG operated, I am deeply concerned about who will fill the void left by TGG’s closing. So far, it has been left as a gaping hole in the community. I hear frequently from old members and current community members who are still angry and devastated about the closing of the lab. The past two school years have started with no Open Doors School housed in the cozy basement of the lab. I often wonder how many teenagers have had to go back to their original schools where they were bullied and looked down upon for how they looked, acted, or for their interests. For the last three years, the young, aspiring minds of Grand Rapids’ poorest communities will have to go without refurbished computers they could get for free through the Computers for Families program housed at the lab. Similarly, during the last three years, while people suffered from power outages, intense heat, and winter storms, I wonder where they sheltered. I think about how they suffered, and how we used to welcome them into the comfortable lobby to charge their electronics, take a shower, and even sleep.

Chris’s crimes are fact. He did those things, he sold bitcoin to an undercover agent and did so without a license. He deposited money in amounts under \$10,000. However, he also paid taxes on all of the bitcoin he purchased. He committed these crimes to help keep his life-long dream of a public science center open and operational. He did so without realizing the full extent of illegality of his actions. These crimes had no victims – NONE. I believe this context matters.

It is extremely devastating that the prosecution decided to start their interaction after a simple mistake by storming the building with 50 federal agents, terrorizing the volunteers that worked there, and accosting the students. I find myself asking - how could a government that is supposed to protect and serve the public willingly and enthusiastically destroy a pillar of the community in a downtrodden neighborhood? How could they purposefully and unnecessarily steal a resource from a community in Grand Rapids that needs it more than ever? And it appears there is only one answer. Their actions were not ones of justice, but of showing power, of making a show and an example when it was unnecessary.

If the prosecution had wanted a just outcome, this entire ordeal would have been solved with a conversation over a cheap coffee at the lab and a few hours of time. I am horrified at the shortsightedness of a prosecution that can see only the letter of the law while being blind to the spirit of it. In the end, the crimes that Chris has pleaded guilty to pale in comparison to the consequences of the actions of the prosecution.

I was brought up by my father, a government and history teacher for over 30 years, to trust the government and to trust law enforcement. He always told me that they would do what is best for the citizens, that they would right the wrongs in our nation and in our communities, that they would make sure justice was served. After witnessing this ordeal and how it has played out for the past 3 years, it pains me to say that I know my dad was wrong. Watching this case and all that has happened from it has set fire to those beliefs. I have watched all of the core staff members move from respecting and encouraging law enforcement to avoiding and fearing them; a feeling that is entirely justified.

Moving Forward

Even despite all of this, Chris continues to do the best he can to make the world a better place and has kept his dream of getting people excited about science alive. He continues on his mission to educate, inspire, and entertain even without the help of his non-profit. I have watched him rebuild computers for the needy, inspire high school kids to pursue their technical passions without shame of being labeled a nerd, and work to create calming content for those with Anxiety or ASD. This, however, is now on a much smaller scale than it should be, and a much smaller scale than it could have been with the power of hundreds of volunteers behind his mission.

Chris had continued to work on developing educational content in his home shop to inspire and instruct others all over the world. He has continued to do his nightly live stream which creates community among many of the same people who followed the lab. These are often people who struggle with social interaction, who would be considered outcasts in their hometowns, but who can find a sense of belonging, community, and fellowship among others like them.

Chris continues to be selfless and kind with his time and the little money he has. I watched in December 2020 as Chris, still devastated both financially and emotionally, give his entire savings at the time (nearly \$2000) to a friend of his who was homeless and needed the money as a security deposit for a rental home. Her two kids and husband were able to move out of the dangerous motel they were in and into a house just in time for Christmas. Shortly after that, I

watched him help a local kid who used to frequent the lab secure housing and a job after his mom kicked him out of the house because he decided to get vaccinated.

One of the things I admire about Chris is that he remains positive and optimistic after all that has happened. He still works to refurbish laptops on a small scale and began giving them away earlier this year. He has given them away free of charge to many deserving locals including an aspiring welder who helped him pick up trash and a community member near the power plants who was struggling to find a job without being able to write a resume.

More recently, he has started helping people on a larger scale with the help of his nightly audience. The audience has grown past just the lab followers and started to attract new attention. Generally, Chris will do fundraisers on his show for project materials, equipment, and his own living expenses. However, this fall he asked everyone to direct what they would have donated to him that month to one of the online community members named Sean. Sean and his mom were about to default on their mortgage payment and were in extreme distress over it. Chris gave up an entire month's pay to help them raise nearly \$1400. This December, it came to Chris's attention that another member of the online community has a broken furnace that they cannot afford to replace. As I write this, he is currently giving up the donations he would normally get in the month of December and having them directed to these members to help them purchase a new furnace before it gets very cold.

All throughout 2021, Chris has been dedicated to his video production but also started doing consulting and contract engineering work at Commonwealth Hydropower. Despite having two jobs and working many hours, I have continued to see him take weekends to help those around him. Earlier this fall, we took two full weekends to help a kind, old woman recovering from cancer. We rewired her garage and installed a new garage door after one of her renters broke it and she could not afford to get it fixed. Instead of just doing the minimum required for the job, even when he is volunteering, Chris always goes above and beyond to make sure the job is done right. I watched as, instead of simply running the cables and getting it working, he meticulously organized, labeled, and stapled every wire and cable to make sure that it would stay working for years to come. This is certainly not the only time I have witnessed Chris do this; it has become a way of life for him.

Even in seemingly normal or mundane circumstances, Chris is still trying to help people in ways I cannot imagine doing myself. Chris is the type of person that can talk to anyone, make them laugh, and feel comfortable. This makes him an outlier in a community of nerds and those who sometimes struggle socially. Chris knows this and will go out of his way to make sure people feel included, entertained, and safe. This is evident in ways you wouldn't expect. For example, we often go to Home Depot or similar stores to get supplies for projects. Even when I think it will be a quick trip, I can never count on that because Chris always feels compelled to help people in the aisles if there is no salesperson around. Since Chris is quite knowledgeable in these areas, the customers are appreciative.

Similarly, Chris is a self-taught magician and often uses this skill to make people laugh and keep them calm. He often will do this while in waiting rooms for doctors, for example, and there are children who are nervous. Instead of using the time to sit idly and scroll his phone, Chris goes out of his way to make sure that everyone around him feels calm, comfortable, and entertained.

Ever since I have known Chris, he has made a point to always stop on the side of the road if he sees a car that needs help. I cannot count the number of times we have changed a flat tire, refueled a vehicle, or helped a stranded motorist; that number is enormous. Each spring, I help him make snack bags and stock water in his car to give to people on the side of the road. In the last year, Chris took time to document the equipment and tools he keeps in the back of his car in a video with the hopes of inspiring others to do the same. Now, it has become a habit of his online community to always share when they help someone.

There is a small group of people around Chris, including myself, and we function like an odd but happy family. Oftentimes, he will gather the group of us to help when someone is in need. Sometimes, we all gather to help a friend, like the time Chris organized all of us to help a friend move. His items were stranded in Grand Rapids, and he was in Lansing. What would have taken him weeks to move on his own, we all got together and moved for him in a matter of hours. Another example of this is that right after the lab closed, we all came together to help build a complete studio for the lab's former AV team to produce their video series. Chris gave his time and donated the supplies to make this happen, he even gave them his own personal cameras to get started. In the three years since that happened, they have grown their channel to over 50,000 subscribers and have started to make a living at it.

Personally, I have also been affected by Chris and his kind, giving nature. During 2017, I was in an abusive relationship that I was unable to leave. Chris encouraged me, supported me, and helped me eventually leave that relationship. During my transition, he gave me a loan for \$2500 so that I could afford furniture, my first month's rent, and a security deposit. I think it was all the money he had at the time. He helped me secure safe housing, and even brought his small group of core friends to set up all of the furniture in the apartment for me on a weekend while I was out of town. He supported me in the turmoil that followed and through my divorce. I am unendingly grateful for all that he has done for me and for helping me get out of that relationship. Without him, I would likely still be stuck in that terrible place.

Conclusion

Chris is a good, kind-hearted person and still, despite all that he has lost, has held onto that burning passion to create excitement around science and technology. He is motivated not by money, but by the good he can do in the world. He works diligently to give a home to those who feel excluded by the rest of the world because of their tech-focused interests. He constantly invests in people, many of whom he has never met in real life, with his time, energy, and knowledge. He provides a safe space for people to belong, to simply be themselves, all while focusing on making the world a little smarter, a little better at critical thinking, and a little more connected.

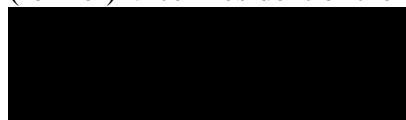
Chris Boden has made my life better, and I am so glad I have come to know him. He has inspired me to act more kindly, with more patience, and have a more positive outlook on life. I understand that he has pleaded guilty to three different felonies, but it is my hope that you can take into account the context of his actions as well as the type of person he is when you assign his sentence.

Chris makes the world a more loving, inclusive, and educated place. He brings a light to our community that cannot be replaced. We need more people like Chris in our world than ever right now; please do not take away his light.

Regards,

Kathryn Christopher

(former) Vice President of the Board of Directors



The National Science Institute

